

One for the Dough Mixer

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Our LHD was leading the ARG back from Puerto Rican operating area after a successful missile exercise and Caribbean port visit. A warm, sunny Sunday afternoon with calm seas was a perfect setting for a steel-beach picnic. In beach attire, enjoying my burger, the last thing on my mind was the possibility of a medical evacuation 300 miles from anywhere. It just goes to show you that no matter what you're doing, the calmness of a beautiful day at sea can be easily and quickly shattered.

While most of the crew were partaking of the spoils on the flight deck, some were working below decks that afternoon, namely the bake shop. There, an E-3 food-service attendant (FSA) with his Marine counterpart, a private first class (PFC) who was temporarily assigned to the mess decks and who had been onboard less than a week, decided to take it upon themselves to clean the dough-mixing machine. Great initiative, right? Under most circumstances, yes, but on that particular afternoon, the Marine and Sailor got creative and decided to "test" the power of industrial machinery.

The dough mixer was designed to be cleaned by one person using a procedure clearly posted on the machine itself. It takes two hands to operate the machine, so one person cannot have either hand inside the mixing bowl while the mixing blades are in motion. With the bakery supervisor out of the bake shop, the PFC decided, for some unknown reason, to challenge the dough mixer to a duel. The PFC believed he could prevent the mixing blade from moving with nothing more than the might of his hands. With a firm grip on the solid steel mixing blade, the Marine coaxed the Sailor into "jogging" the machine's power switch. Once again, and for some unknown reason—by simultaneously depressing the jog switch and the slow speed switch—the FSA turned on the mixer and the mixing blade, being grasped vigorously by the PFC, rotated about one-quarter turn and stopped adjacent to the mixing bowl. You guessed it: the PFC's hand



It looks bad, but after several surgeries, the Marine's fingers were saved, and he will end up with only partial disability in his right hand.

went along for the ride, resulting in four partly severed fingers.

Upon learning of the casualty, the entire command element sprang into action as medical personnel stabilized the PFC. Four hours later, a Coast Guard helicopter, after a 300-plus-mile flight and with a C-130 *Hercules* in direct support, landed on spot six. The patient then was flown to an orthopedic surgeon in Miami. All fingers were saved, and after four to five intense operations, the hapless PFC may get out of this with only partial disability in his right hand.

Can anybody say, "ORM"? It just did not happen in this case. The most basic form of operational risk management is simple cost-benefit analysis. What possibly could be gained by trying to arrest the movement of such a powerful machine with your bare hands? The risk in this case far outweighed any possible benefit. It's human nature to push limits, the consequences can be devastating. Ninety percent of all reportable mishaps occur because personnel don't follow procedures. In the case of the Sailor and Marine in this incident, there was a blatant disregard for procedures. Horseplay has no place on board ship or any other naval facility. That PFC is lucky to still have both of his hands, and the FSA is likely to feel bad about this incident for a long time. ☹